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# Chapter 3

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## Theories and Definitions of Giftedness

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A systems approach or administrative model for gifted education tailor makes the program to fit the assessed needs of the local district. It is a diagnostic and prescriptive approach to providing needed services. This chapter provides insight into how theories of intelligence and definitions of giftedness are incorporated into the local program. In effect, how to take the base components and align them with local needs. The theoretical base that is chosen will direct the focus of the entire program from philosophy through identification and services.

### DEFINITIONS OF GIFTEDNESS

#### Purposes and Criteria for a Definition of Giftedness

1. It must be based on the best available research about the characteristics of gifted individuals rather than a romanticized notion or unsupported opinion.
2. It must provide guidance in the selection and/or development of instruments and procedures that can be used to design defensible identification systems.
3. It must give direction and be logically related to the programming practices such as the selection of materials and instructional methods, the selection and training of teachers, and the determination of procedures that can be used for evaluation.
4. It must be capable of generating research studies that will verify or fail to verify the validity of the definition.

Source: Unknown

### THEORETICAL USE OF DEFINITIONS

This manual will focus on three definitions. Since your program is being developed to meet the unique needs of the students in your community, you may wish to explore other definitions. In development process, you will synthesize and adapt them as needed for your program.

*A successful program works because it effectively addresses the needs of gifted students in a specific school or school district and these needs generally vary from school to school, district to district.*

—Borland, pg. 46

*If some degree of  
subjectivity cannot  
be tolerated, then  
our definition of  
giftedness and the  
resulting programs  
will logically be  
limited to abilities  
that can only be  
measured by  
objective tests.  
—Renzulli, J.S.  
“What makes  
giftedness: Reexam-  
ining a definition.”  
Phi Delta Kappan,  
60, p.181)*

## **USOE DEFINITION (1978)**

This definition is an umbrella concept and is the broadest based conception. It defines the needs for talent development in the areas of *intellectual, creative, specific academic, leadership, performing and visual arts*. By adopting this definition the district may centralize all services for high-ability students under one program. Program options should address all of these areas. Talent finding should address each of these areas and services should be structured to meet the needs of those determined to be the most talented or evidence the greatest potential talent in these areas. Typically, the talent finding process for this model is divided into a screening section using a high percentile ranking on a standardized achievement test, a standardized aptitude test and a teacher rating scale; a preassessment period where the student is more closely monitored for high potential; and a more formal evaluation period in which individualized testing may occur.

This definition is widely used by many states and districts. Montana State Law uses an adaptation of this one. A criticism of this definition is that the categories are “frequently ambiguous, indefinable, or overlapping, and are frequently adopted without regard for their actual implications for identification or programming” (Treffinger and Renzulli, 1986 in Davis and Rimm, 1989, p. 13). This definition was revised by the U.S. Department of Education in 1993. The revision is included in chapter four.

## **MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY**

The use of Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences is redefining our view of intelligence, or human intellectual competence, and of the ways we can identify extraordinary potential. Definitions grounded in this theory are directed toward the observation of an individual’s ability to “resolve genuine problems or difficulties and, when appropriate, to create an effective product—and must also entail the potential for finding or creating problems—thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge” (Gardner, 1983, pp.60-61)

Models are being developed and tested that rely on the trained observation of traits which seem to be common in people with extraordinary problem-solving potential. These models attempt to identify this potential within the community’s culture and to use these cultural traits to help define high potential. This assures that the assessment of extraordinary potential is that which is valued in its own culture.

Using Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983), C. June Maker has developed the definition stating that the key element in giftedness or high competence is “The ability to solve the most complex problems in the most efficient, effective, or economical ways.” According to this definition, a gifted individual possesses

abilities traditionally associated with both high intelligence and high creativity. Such an individual is capable of:

- a. understanding problems already defined clearly,
- b. using the most efficient, effective, or economical methods that are known, and
- c. reaching appropriate solutions based on current knowledge and thought.

The gifted individual also is capable of:

- a. creating a new or clearer definition of an existing problem,
- b. devising new and more efficient, effective, or economical methods, and
- c. reaching solutions that may be different from the usual, but are recognized as being better than previous solutions.

(Maker, Educating Able Learners, Fall 1992, p.13)

This definition seems to have much merit. The essence of the definition is that the gifted or highly able individual has superior problem-solving ability.

Another view of giftedness, also based on Gardner's work, is being proposed by Mary Frasier. Her work indicates that we do not measure giftedness directly. Instead, we infer giftedness by observing certain characteristics or behaviors of individuals (Hagan, 1980, pg. 1). This model also includes the idea that "factors found in differing sociocultural contexts impact the manifestation of giftedness thereby influencing the way giftedness is identified" (Frasier, M.M., Martin, D.E., and Garcia, J. H., 1992). Based on this work, a culturally unbiased identification system is being developed to help guide the identification and programming for high-ability students. The system will be discussed in the next chapter on Identification.

*No single  
(predeveloped or  
theoretical) model  
can hope to meet  
the needs of school  
districts that differ  
along so many lines.  
—Borland pg. 46  
(parens added)*

### THREE-RING MODEL DEFINITION

Another frequently used definition is Renzulli's Three-Ring Model. Renzulli (1986) argues that "Gifted behavior...reflects an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—these clusters being above average (but not necessarily high) general and/or specific abilities, high levels of task commitment (motivation), and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance" (Davis and Rimm, 1989).

*A systems approach  
or administrative  
model for gifted  
education tailor  
makes the program  
to fit the assessed  
needs of the local  
district.*

*The committee's  
task is to review  
the various  
philosophies,  
theories and  
definitions and to  
develop a philosophy  
statement and  
definition of  
giftedness for the  
local program.*

This conception of giftedness suggests that gifted behaviors can be developed in a broader spectrum (up to 15 to 20 percent) of the school population than the small percentage of students who are usually identified by high scores on intelligence or achievement tests.

There is some concern in the field that this definition can lead to identifying only those students who are already succeeding in an educational program.

### **For further information on program theory and definitions:**

Borland, James H.; Planning and Implementing Programs for the Gifted, Teachers College Press, New York, 1989

Davis, Gary A. and Sylvia B. Rimm; Education of the Gifted and Talented, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1989

Frasier, M.M., Martin, D.E., and Garcia, J.H., A paradigm to guide investigations into the identification of gifted in economically disadvantaged and limited English proficiency populations, Unpublished manuscript. University of Georgia, National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, Athens, GA, 1992

Gardner, Howard; Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Basic Books, New York, 1983

Maker, C. June; "Intelligence and Creativity in Multiple Intelligences: Identification and Development," Educating Able Learners, Fall 1992

Renzulli, Joseph S., Editor; Systems and Models for Development Programs for the Gifted and Talented; Creative Learning Press, Inc., 1986